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QUANTUM ENCHANTMENT

The Spell of Rosette

Arrows of Time

Strange Attractors

— QUANTUM ENCHANTMENT —

STRANGE ATTRACTORS

KIM FALCONER

— BOOK THREE —

HARPER

Voyager

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A strange attractor is a pattern that appears chaotic, random in both trajectory and purpose, until seen from the right perspective.

TEMPLE LOS LOMA, EARTH & CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

CHAPTER 1

‘Demons,’ Rosette whispered. She gripped the rock face, her fingers cramped into spider shapes. The sun was scorching hot. Her clothes stuck to her back, sweat dripping down her spine. She didn’t know how much longer she could hang on. Below was a red desert plain marked only by the wrought-iron gates of Temple Los Loma and the boulders that concealed the portal. Her familiar paced in front of them, pausing every few strides to look up.

You’re not moving, Maudi. What’s wrong?

Her boot slipped and she hung midair. *I’m fine, Drayco.* She caught her breath and found better footing. *Can you see them yet?*

I can, Maudi, and if you want to stay concealed, I suggest you hurry things along.

Thanks, Dray. I’m coming.

Drayco had made it look easy; he’d scampered down the cliff then waited for them to catch up. Teg

wasn't so sure. He had suggested they shape-shift, her flying to the portal while he followed Drayco's descent in wolf form, but Rosette had cautioned against it. The shock wave from the transformation could be felt for a fair distance, like sounding an alarm. What they wanted was stealth. How hard could the climb be?

Harder than I thought. Rosette swallowed the dust in her throat and looked up. 'Teg, we have to jump!'

'From here?' He was squeezed into a narrow crevice, loose dirt breaking free as he tried for a better grip.

'It's not that far.'

'Easy for you to say. You're ten feet closer.'

'There's no more time.' She took a breath and let go, pushing back from the rock wall as she launched. The ground came up to greet her sooner than she expected, jolting her legs and spine. She tucked into a backward roll as Teg landed in front of her.

Finally, Maudi. Drayco rubbed his cheek on a nearby rock. *They come.*

'We have to hide,' she said.

'Where?' Teg looked at the open expanse. 'They'll know if we go through the portal now.'

'Not the portal. Come closer, both of you,' she said as she dusted herself off. 'And don't move.'

'You're going to weave a glamour out here?' Teg asked, rubbing his elbow. 'They'll spot it, won't they?'

'Not if you stop talking and keep still.' She visualised a circle around her body and pulled him in. 'Slow your breathing. Think calm thoughts.'

Drayco sat in front of them, his tall ears pointed forward. *There's no more time. Make the curtain now, Maudi.*

She threw the enchantment around them like a cape and there, in front of the gates of Temple Los Loma, it

settled over their heads and they disappeared. A moment later Kreshkali and Jarrod came into view, striding along the track. They were on foot and travelling light — backpacks and swords — their long cloaks flowing out behind them. They were overdressed for the desert, but not for where they were going. Rosette reinforced the glamour. Three ravens winged in, cawing and scolding. One landed on Kreshkali's shoulder. The other two perched on the rocky outcroppings that marked the entrance to the portal. As the birds shuffled their wings and settled, heads tilting this way and that, Rosette reminded herself to breathe.

From inside the enchantment, the world took on a violet hue — the glamour filtering out all but the shorter waves of light. It created a surreal ambiance, her only hint that the spell was working. From the outside, she hoped it was having the desired effect — a seamless blending of the rock wall with no hint of their presence. Instead of seeing Rosette, her temple cat and the young Lupin a hand's reach away, Kreshkali and Jarrod would notice only the dry red landscape and the crevice that housed the portal. The sun baking down from its zenith cast no shadow and the hot breeze blew right through them.

The glamour didn't actually make them vanish. That would have been the most effective way to weave the concealment, but neither Rosette nor Teg had mastered the technique. Her glamour simply absorbed the light normally reflected from their bodies; with nothing to bounce off, nothing could be seen. It took only a small additional conjuring of the Elementals to paint the landscape behind them. It was a good spell for the occasion but she strained to hear what they were saying. The glamour filtered sound waves as well.

Do you know what they're talking about, Drayco?
She let the thought slip through her mind shield.

I do.

And?

They're talking about the Lupin.

Teg?

Not him. The one headed this way.

Teg shifted behind her.

Hold still! she cautioned him.

Hotha comes, Teg's mental voice whispered.

I see that. Just relax. It'll be all right.

Not if we're caught.

We won't be. Hush.

Hotha loped towards them, shifting from wolf form to human as he came to a halt. The shock wave rushed past, stirring her hair. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the glamour, glad the Lupin was more intent on talking than observing the environment. Hotha was the leader of the Lupin clan on Earth and apparently he had much to say to Kreshkali before she left. Jarrod looked on. Rosette was relieved the glamour worked for him as well. Because he was a quantum sentient, his visual consciousness could perceive energy regardless of the light spectrum. All he had to do was tune into it. Fortunately, his focus stayed on the others.

Hotha was having a tête-à-tête with one of Kali's ravens. He smiled, bowing with what looked like an apology. Rosette took a step closer to the edge of her glamour and pressed her ear against the violet barrier.

'Your apprentices are safely tucked away in Dumarka then?' Hotha asked Kreshkali.

'They'd be scathing to hear you put it that way, but yes. They went last night.'

He nodded, giving her a sly smile. ‘Good luck in your search, my queen. Be safe. The corridors ...’

‘They’ll run true for me. It’s your safety I’m concerned about. Eyes open, Hotha.’

They embraced, kissing in the traditional manner of Gaelean temple witches — both cheeks and then the lips. Kreshkali didn’t step out of his arms immediately. She whispered something Rosette couldn’t catch before slipping into the portal behind Jarrod and the ravens. The plasma ripples jumped out — a lightning-flash greeting — and they were gone.

Hotha remained for some time, staring into the portal that had turned again into an unremarkable rock formation, a fissure in an otherwise banal landscape. As she held the glamour in place, he shifted his view, focusing on where she stood.

Don’t think! she cautioned both Teg and Drayco, sending the message directly to their minds. *Shield!*

Hotha continued to stare until he turned around, shaking his head and chuckling. ‘Fynn, lad. I said to stay.’

Maudi, this could be a problem.

I see that, Dray.

Fynn came loping up, tongue lolling. He may have stayed for a while but the little hunting dog clearly didn’t want to be left behind. He had a particular attachment to her and Drayco. She hoped it wasn’t so strong he would sniff them out.

‘What is it, boy?’ Hotha said when Fynn sniffed, his tail going in circles. He was trotting back and forth in front of the portal, right where Rosette and Teg touched down from the cliff. ‘You missing your people? Come on then, you’ll join my pack.’

Fynn’s head went up and he sat, barking once, his tail sweeping the ground. If Hotha continued to speak

to the dog, Rosette didn't hear. They were moving away; she let out her breath.

That was lucky, Teg said.

There wasn't much of a shock wave when Hotha shifted back to wolf form, the blast diminished by her glamour. He trotted through the gates, Fynn on his heels, and headed back to Temple Los Loma. When he was out of sight, Rosette relaxed, allowing the spell to disperse. Sweat dripped down her brow and she wiped it with the back of her hand. 'Close one.'

Teg clapped her on the shoulder, letting out a whistle. 'That's the best glamour I've ever seen,' he said, keeping his voice low. 'Hotha was staring right at me and didn't suspect a thing.'

'I don't know. I think he suspected something. I know Fynn did, and he might mention it. We'd better go.'

'If he did, it baffled him.' Teg gave her another pat. 'You're fantastic. I almost wish we were going to Dumarka to train for the winter.'

'There'll be plenty of time for that once we find An' Lawrence.' She looked down at her belly. 'I don't plan on this rescue taking long.'

Drayco's tail lashed. *Less talking, more moving, Maudi.*

Good idea. 'Safely tucked away indeed,' she added in a barely audible tone.

'Shall we?' Teg gestured towards the portal.

Rosette took a final look at the green apple trees and the gates of Temple Los Loma, scanning the dry red lands beyond. She bowed to the Entity and followed Teg and her familiar into the portal. Her face relaxed as she touched the warm plasma stream, electricity zapping towards her palm. 'Follow them,' she said. 'Take us as near to Rowan An' Lawrence as we can

possibly get.’ She closed her eyes and the portal swept them away.

In retrospect, Rosette wished she’d worded the request differently — perhaps with less urgency and more circumspection. Where the Entity took them was as close as they could get to her father, Sword Master Rowan An’ Lawrence, but it was also right in the midst of a battle. The place was a sea of uniforms, red tunics and feather-crested helmets of foot soldiers interspersed with a darker-garbed cavalry. Scores of riders charged past, hooves churning and coat-tails flying.

She couldn’t tell who they were fighting. There was no sign of an enemy, but by the casualties alone it had to be a powerful one. She took in the landscape; the hot golden plains spread out like butter on bread in every direction, fringed with pines and white oaks. ‘The Corsanon Fields?’ she whispered. The troops were defending their city, though the gates were not visible from where she stood. ‘What in the many-worlds is he doing in here?’

Teg pointed to the south. ‘That’s their target.’

The red-mantled troops were converging on a distant knoll — all their energy was directed there, but she still couldn’t spot the enemy. The Corsanons drew their swords as they rushed past, the broad blades glinting in the midday sun. Those on foot were running double time to keep up with the cavalry — tall riders mounted on golden horses. She frowned. ‘*When* in the demon’s underworld are we?’ she whispered. It was clearly not any Corsanon she knew. The palominos had vanished before she was born.

Teg scratched his neck. ‘This can’t be right, can it? It looks like before the temple wars.’

Or during. Drayco's hackles were up. *Maudi, they have yellow horses.*

I see that, Dray. We are before our time, again. The din of battle droned in the background. Rosette shook her head. 'The Entity's askew. This can't be where the Sword Master is. Let's get out of here before we're spotted.'

As she spoke, the Entity expelled her from the portal, like an innkeeper tossing a stray cat. She landed on her feet, eyes flashing. The stream of Corsanon warriors stopped, stunned for an instant, before pointing their swords at her. She tore back to the portal, but Drayco and Teg were flung out as well, the crevice snapping shut in front of her face. 'Swords!' she screamed. 'Teg, kill circle!'

She drew her blade and extended her arm in an arc as she spun around. Her eyes relaxed, losing focus as she widened her peripheral vision. She barely noticed the three heads rolling from her single swipe. Teg had jumped to the side, out of the reach of her swing, drawing his sword and covering her back. For an instant they stood motionless. Drayco crouched at her side, facing down the horde. Frozen by the sudden decapitations, the warriors quickly recovered and sprang.

Rosette ducked to avoid an axe slicing over her head and Drayco sprang at the wielder, snapping his neck. The axe fell from his hand, clattering as it hit the rocky ground. Two more stepped up to replace him. They were stripped to the waist, their chests soaked red with blood and sweat. Their swords were thick blades and heavy, made more for cleaving than her thin, articulate weapon. She knew she could outmanoeuvre these fighters one at a time — but so many? That would take something else. She needed to conjure a massive boost

of magic. Teg was holding ground behind her but they were surrounded, and ridiculously outnumbered.

She called on the Elementals, drawing the energy to her, channelling it through her body, up her arms and into her blade. It took longer than she expected, the Elementals distracted by some other summons. They came, though, weaving into her spell as she honed the energy to a pinpoint. The force of the boost heated her sword blue-white.

She swung, releasing the energy. She could feel Teg do the same behind her and was grateful he'd recently learned the technique. They continued to boost and cut, taking down any warriors who didn't retreat fast enough and hurling away those who charged. It wasn't long before the attackers were down, the remnants running as Drayco pelted after them.

Leave them, Dray. We have to get out of here.

I've spotted the Sword Master, Maudi. He's over there, by the pines.

He's here? Rosette snapped her wrist, flicking blood from her blade before sheathing it. *Got him.* She tuned in, listening to An' Lawrence grunt obscenities. *He seems upset.*

More than usual? Drayco chuckled in her mind.

Not far from them another band of warriors was charging the knoll. So far, their efforts seemed futile. The slopes were strewn with bodies — limbs askew, many headless — and in the centre stood the Sword Master and his familiar, Scylla. The ferocity coming from them permeated the air. It nearly knocked her over where she stood. There was no sign of fatigue in his aura, nor was there any indication he'd sensed her presence.

Rosette thought to send him a mental message, a scathing one, but changed her mind. No good

distracting him, no matter how much he deserved her wrath. It looked like a tricky fight. The odds would be a challenge even for him and Scylla. The feline swiped at warriors, toppling them like empty tins. None got up again.

Dray, can you tell Scylla we're here, coming up the north side of the hill. We don't need her attacking us as well. She's gone berserk.

Scylla knows we're here. He paused for a moment. *She's glad it's me.* Drayco's message was sweet in her mind.

Of course she is. Please make sure she tells An' Lawrence. He's gathering for quite a boost there. Can you feel it?

A wind rippled across Drayco's fur. *I can.*

Oh, demons. Here it comes! 'Teg! To me!' She clutched his arm and pulled him down. 'Drayco, get in here!' Rosette conjured a dome of energy and they crouched, shielded from the blast. It hurtled towards them — a fireball taking out everything in its path.

The force ripped by, knocking the Corsanon warriors back like tumbleweed, even the dead ones. In spite of the shield, some of the blast whirled into their shelter, sending her hair streaming back from her face, eyes watering, sand stinging. Teg gripped her tight and Drayco's head pressed into her lap. As the wave subsided, the surviving warriors scrambled away, racing back towards the city at the sound of the retreat. Rosette lowered her shield, locking eyes with An' Lawrence as she stood. She crossed her arms, ignoring the sea of bodies, blood and gore between them. 'What in the demon's pit of gnash are you doing? Trying to kill me?' she shouted.

Rosette! You're alive. He answered back with a mental message. His voice sounded thick in her mind,

as if he was choking.

‘Barely, after that blast, Sword Master.’ She made a show of straightening her clothes and tightening her sword belt before heading towards him. ‘What in all the worlds are you doing here?’ She swept her arm across the field. ‘And *when* is this, anyway?’

‘Corsanon’s past, I think.’ He flicked blood from his blade and sheathed it then waved them in.

‘And why are you here?’ she asked again.

‘I was searching for Makee, to help you. Last time I looked, you were in desperate need of a High Priestess and Kreshkali was nowhere to be found.’

Rosette laughed. Cupping her hands to her mouth and shouting as if he were hard of hearing, she yelled, ‘I’m fine now, but thanks anyway.’

Maudi, is this conversation wise? We are still in the middle of a battlefield and the enemy isn’t far off.

At that moment an arrow shot from the pines and before Rosette could warn him, An’ Lawrence flicked his round shield behind him. She heard the shaft sink deep into the wood. A dozen more followed.

‘Run!’ An’ Lawrence shouted. He flashed his sword and several arrows rebounded off the blade, returning full speed towards the archers. He disappeared down the other side of the knoll, emerging on a golden warhorse with a flaxen mane and tail. He urged it into a collected canter, picking his way across the battlefield towards her, shield slung to his back.

‘Where did you get that horse?’ Her mouth hung open as it came towards her.

‘A parting gift from La Makee. Get moving!’

‘La Makee?’ As she turned towards the portal, a score of riders appeared on the horizon. ‘So much for the retreat.’ Looking back at An’ Lawrence, she caught sight of a full complement of archers, also

on horseback, charging at the gallop. In a matter of seconds they would be trodden into the ground.

‘Shift!’ An’ Lawrence snapped her out of her stupor.

She took the form of a black wolf, a better shape for fighting than her customary falcon. *The portal’s cut off!* she screamed into his mind.

This way. He rolled the horse back and shot westward.

Teg had already changed into his alternative Lupin form — wolf — and was racing after An’ Lawrence. The warhorse swerved, and they headed northwest at a dead run.

You can’t mean to race all the way to the Prieta Mountains, can you, Sword Master? she asked as she leapt over bodies and abandoned weapons.

That’s our only way out. He stood up in his stirrups, looking down at the three as they caught up. *Since when does ‘shift’ mean anything but a black falcon to your line?*

You like it?

No.

Well, I do. Rosette accelerated, running ahead of the others, blazing the way towards the foothills of Los Loma Prieta.

CORSANON FIELDS, GAELA

CHAPTER 2

‘We’re too late,’ Kreshkali said, gazing over the battlefield. There was little movement save the wind through the distant pine trees. It wafted over the ground, lifting red hems and ruffling the crows’ feathers as they hopped from corpse to corpse, exposing the white down beneath their black mantles. In the pale blue sky buzzards circled. ‘Damn that man. Where is he now?’

‘Are you sure An’ Lawrence was ever here?’ Jarrod asked, scanning the fields. He had to shout to be heard over the crows.

Kali covered her nose when the wind shifted. She pointed with one finger. ‘What do you see out there?’ she asked, her voice muffled by her hand.

‘Murder? Death? Decay? Way too many black birds?’

‘What else?’

‘Stench. It’s revolting.’

‘You can’t see stench.’

‘I can.’

‘Fair enough, but look deeper.’

Jarrood frowned. ‘I know you can’t recognise his footprints from this far away. Even I can’t do that.’

‘Look at the dead.’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘Jarrod, this is no ordinary battle scene.’

The late afternoon sun emerged from behind the clouds, illuminating the field with a rosy glow. The dead were rotting where they’d fallen; from their uniforms, it was clear they were Corsanon warriors. It was a field of red cloaks, broken limbs and horse-trampled dirt.

‘How so, exactly?’ Jarrod asked.

‘The ground’s littered with the fallen but can you see who they were fighting?’

Jarrood’s eyebrows went up. ‘Now that you mention it, I can’t.’

‘This was a one-sided skirmish, Jarrod, and there is only one ... or two ...’ She frowned, thinking of alternatives before going on. ‘Only one or two Sword Masters who would take on a legion single-handed. The signature of magic is all over this place. There’s been a colossal spell unleashed here. More than one.’ She felt the air with her fingertips.

‘I get that too. You think it was him?’

‘I do, and not long ago.’

‘Long enough for a moderate level of decomposition.’

‘In this heat, it could be less than twenty-four hours.’

‘It’ll get worse.’

Kali narrowed her eyes. ‘I wonder why the dead haven’t been buried? We’re only a stone’s throw from the city.’

‘Maybe the battle’s still going on? A pursuit?’

‘Maybe. In any case, we need to get wind of which way he headed.’

‘He’d want to run fast with the forces of Corsanon after him. They couldn’t have been happy.’

‘What was he thinking? This isn’t even his fight any more, unless ...’ Kreshkali whispered the words to herself, rubbing her hands together. The Three Sisters, perched behind her on the escarpment, cawed, their pale blue eyes glistening. *See what you can discover, my lovelies. You know who we seek?*

They took to the sky. *The big man? The Sword Man?* they answered her in unison.

That’s the one. Off you go, and mind the crows. No tussles.

No need. We would out-tussle them all.

Sweethearts, there are hundreds of black birds out there and you’re trespassing in their territory. Please don’t start anything.

They cawed out a cheeky retort as they flapped hard to gain altitude. They were larger than the other birds and their progress went unchallenged. For once there was plenty of food to go around.

‘Let’s check that hill.’ Jarrod pointed to the east. ‘The energy signature emanates from there.’

The macabre landscape assaulted them from every side. Bodies, and body parts, were everywhere, twisted at unnatural angles and covered with crows that took flight when they came near then resettled after they passed. Kali swallowed the bile in her throat as she examined the tracks around the small hill. She waved Jarrod closer, pointing at the ground. ‘What do you make of these?’

Jarrod studied the impressions and frowned. ‘Very large wolf tracks,’ he said. ‘Could it be Lupin?’

‘Possible. And see how they cross here and there?’

‘Two of them at least.’ He sketched another print with a thin stick. ‘This isn’t wolf, though, is it?’

‘Feline,’ Kreshkali said.

‘Scylla?’

‘Too big.’

They exchanged looks but said no more.

‘There were dozens of horses here, all shod. The tracks are too distorted to read.’ Kreshkali swatted a mosquito against her neck. ‘Can you see anything more?’

‘It’s been trampled, crossed and re-crossed. There’s one set of hoof prints that stands out, though.’

Kreshkali smiled. Leave it to a farrier to spot something like that. ‘Which one?’

‘Here. The size gives it away. They belong to a warhorse. The rest of these are light cavalry, but look at this.’

Kreshkali braced her hands on her knees, leaning over. ‘Show me.’

‘It’s the shoeing technique. Three toe-clips, front and back, for extra grip, and heels on the hind hooves, for traction. There’s only one temple I know of that follows that tradition.’

‘Treeon?’

‘You got it.’

‘Treeon,’ she whispered. ‘Can you follow the warhorse’s tracks?’

‘They’re muddled — like a stampede ran past — but we can check the perimeter of the hill. You go left and I’ll go right. Call out if you spot the shoe pattern again.’

Kreshkali headed down the hill, keeping her eyes on the ground. She came up with nothing but Jarrod yelled from the other side of the knoll. When she caught up

to him, he was scanning the horizon, pointing towards the northwest.

‘Anything?’ she asked, knowing his eyesight was remarkable.

‘I can’t see through mountains, Kali.’

She squinted. ‘I can’t even see the mountains,’ she said.

‘Send the Three Sisters ahead for a look. They can’t be that far off.’

‘They?’

‘The tracks are fresh. And look here — Scylla’s prints, definitely.’

Kreshkali agreed. ‘And what about these?’ She pointed to another set of tracks, wolf and feline.

Jarrold studied them. ‘It can’t be,’ he said. ‘Rosette’s in Dumarka.’

Kreshkali nodded. A gust of wind blew her cowl back and she let loose a high-pitched whistle. The Three Sisters arrowed towards her. ‘Will you search that way, my sweeties?’ she asked, opening her arm towards the northwest. ‘Find the Sword Master?’

They answered by shooting out across the sky, black wings flapping hard.

‘He’s headed for the Prieta portal, I’ll wager,’ Kali said.

‘What was wrong with this one?’

‘Maybe there was a legion of Corsanons in his way.’ She scanned the ground again. ‘In their way ...’

‘We’ll never catch them on foot.’ Jarrold inspected the terrain. He turned a full circle. ‘We need transport.’

‘I can shift and fly ahead but that would leave you behind.’ She wrinkled her nose at the battleground. ‘Not a good choice. They will come to bury this lot.’

‘That’s the only disadvantage to my tulpa body. It still takes me too long to think up a different species.’

She laughed. 'I could train a pair of green-broke fillies to precision level before that was accomplished. Come on. With all this death, there must be some loose horses around. Spot any?'

'I'm looking.'

She linked minds with her familiars. *Horses, my lovelies? Did you see any without riders?*

Many colours and many hues. What would you like?

Sound, sturdy and sensible. She smiled. *Black's always been my favourite colour, of course.*

The ravens cawed out their delight, circling in the distance. *Pines' edge. Two. One black as should be, the other golden like the sun.*

'Golden like the sun?' Kreshkali repeated, her voice a whisper. 'What time are we in?'

'You found some horses?'

'The Sisters have. I can't spot them from here, but they're at the edge of the woods.'

'Got 'em,' Jarrod said, shielding his eyes as he stared towards the trees. 'Don't know how I missed them. One's as bright as a gold coin. It looks like they could use some help, too.'

'Injured?'

'I don't think so but they've managed to get their reins caught up in the brambles.'

'They've managed to lose their riders too. Be careful. We don't want to be pulling arrows out of each other's backs.'

They crossed the battlefield with their swords drawn, sheathing them when they reached the horses. The black mare took to Kreshkali immediately, nickering as she approached.

'It's like she knows you,' Jarrod said.

'I can't see how, poor dear. She's Corsanon-

bred. Not bad, though, considering the conditions. Desertwind.'

'An elegant breed,' Jarrod said, stroking her arched neck. Her coat was sleek and her black mane long. Her dished face had a thin white stripe down the centre, her brown eyes wide-set and kind.

The mare's reins were caught at a low angle, anchoring her face to the spines of the blackberry brambles. She was impaled all along her off side, thorns gouging her flesh and scoring the leather of the small military saddle. Kali worked quickly to release the reins, talking in a lilting voice and soothing the animal with a calming spell to ease her stress. Jarrod scanned the woods. There were plenty of victims, no survivors.

'She's all right,' Kali said.

The horse quivered, rubbing her head on Kreshkali's shoulder.

'Fine mare.' Jarrod rested his hand on her crest. 'Grateful too.'

The other horse was finer still, though not grateful in any obvious way. A tall gelding, the colour of golden poppies, he stood with his eyes rolled back, whites showing, ears pinned and hind legs flying whenever they approached. Jarrod knew they didn't have time to make friends slowly so he called the horse's bluff, walking straight up to his shoulder and placing one hand firmly on his withers while the other reached for the reins.

'Whoa, son. I'm going to get you out of here.'

The horse swung around to bite. Jarrod offered him the flat of his hand, ignoring the aggression. The golden head jerked back; his ears were still pinned, but he didn't strike again. Jarrod clucked, urging him to take a step forward, acting as if they were old friends

out for a Sunday hunt. Jarrod's manner anticipated full cooperation, and the horse seemed so surprised that he gave it. The gelding stepped closer to the brambles. The reins slackened but even with the extra give, Jarrod found them hopelessly caught. Before the horse lost his patience, he pulled out his knife and cut the leather, keeping a firm hand on the short lengths.

'I can salvage the rest,' Kali said, untangling the long ends of the reins. She was going to secure them to the bridle but handed them to Jarrod when the horse bared his teeth. 'Cranky bastard, isn't he?' she said.

Jarrod stroked his cresting neck and picked long thorns from his mane, ignoring the near hind hoof that flashed out at the mare as she was led past. 'It's no wonder. He's a pin cushion. Look at this.' Blood dripped down the horse's flank, turning his golden legs and white socks a dirty brown. Both animals had suffered similar wounds; their eyes were sunken, coats spiked with dried sweat, and their gait stilted.

'They need water,' Kreshkali said.

'We'll be good as long as they're sound, and it looks like they are.' Jarrod watched the horses walk. 'But you're right. We need to find water before we go anywhere. I wonder how long they were left like this?' He continued to stroke the gelding's neck, talking to him quietly.

'All day, at least.' Kali scanned the sky. *Drinking water for the beasts, lovelies? Can you see any?*

Her familiars came winging back, circling for some time before shooting off south. *Follow. Not far!*

'It looks like there's a water hole over that ridge, on the other side of the portal.'

'It's the wrong direction, Kali. The tracks all lead the other way — like you said, towards the Prietas.'

'True, but the Three Sisters say it's closest. We have

to risk it. These horses can't carry us when they're so dehydrated.'

'It may be contaminated. Or guarded.'

'Let me check.' *Warriors, my lovelies? Do you see any?*

None that live.

Clean water too?

Very clean.

'Apparently it's not guarded,' she said aloud. 'And fit to drink.'

'I hope you're right.' Jarrod led the golden horse, still watching for any signs of lameness in either animal. 'We best pull their saddles and give them a quick rubdown. No telling where those thorns got to.'

They groomed the horses as best they could with wool swatches cut from a fallen warrior's cloak. By the time they mounted up, the gelding's temper had improved somewhat and both animals seemed eager to be away. As the sun dropped towards the horizon they headed out across the field, picking their way around the bodies, following the ravens' line of flight to the water hole.

Shaea watched the witch and her companion ride away. They were travelling south across the battlefield, searching for fresh water, no doubt. The way they were going, they would find it. The wide rock spring wasn't far off. They would also find a hundred Corsanon warriors if they didn't hurry along. Smart as the witch seemed, there was one thing she couldn't possibly know. Among the dead littering this battlefield, there were no scouts. They'd got away, some to follow the sword-witch on his huge warhorse, and some to take word back to

the city. They wouldn't be long in sending out more troops, that was certain.

Maybe the three ravens would raise a warning. They belonged to her; Shaea could tell. They were guiding her straight to water, just like they'd guided her to the horses. She bristled, frustrated with her own inaction. She hadn't dared to challenge them, but it rankled to let them ride away, especially on her brother's charges. She knew it didn't matter now that he was dead, but it seemed wrong that the horses should be stolen while his body was still warm.

She'd come to him when she had the burning — a pain in her chest that she'd recognised immediately as a cry for help, a cry from her brother. She'd felt it before, years ago when they were young children. He'd fallen from a scaffolding and broken three ribs and his right leg. She'd been on the other side of the city, begging for food, when it hit her. It burned from the inside out. She'd startled and muffled a scream, her small grubby hands slapped over her mouth. She'd scooped up the pennies lying bright in the stained oil rag, shoved them in her pocket and run all the way across the city to find him. He'd recovered that time but she knew the pain when she felt it again. It was a warning. It meant her brother Xane was hurt. And the way her heart had pounded this morning — like it would tear her chest apart — she didn't think he had long to live.

He hadn't. Xane was lifeless when she found him, dead without a mark that she could see, save a small arrow in his neck. A Corsanon arrow. *How could he have been shot by his own?*

She didn't pull it out. The arrow would be dipped in hemlock, or a faster-working poison. It was not worth the risk to touch it. She buried him quickly, wanting to keep the crows from his face. His beautiful, unseeing

eyes were still there, but that was only because he'd covered himself with his cloak. Had he known she would come? Was he saving her from a hideous welcome? How long had he held out, before he slipped away? She would never know.

Once she found his body, her only thought was to bury him, away from the crows and the Corsanon death wagons. There would be no mass burning for Xane, not if she could help it. And she could. She tapped the dirt from her shovel and threw it over her shoulder. 'Rest well, my Xane.' Shaea's eyes filled with tears and she could say no more.

Her twin brother had been a stableboy, apprentice to the master of the Corsanon High Guard. Now he was dead, but she'd always know where his body was. She would have that at least. Shaea looked skyward through the leaves of the white oaks and pines. The sunlight warmed her face, making rainbows of her tears. She had done the ritual, the one they'd promised each other they'd perform if they died apart. He was on his way, alone. She dropped to her knees, choking on the tears. How would she live without him?

They'd been inseparable since birth, as far as she knew. That's what the old witch Rall had told her. They grew up together in the streets of Corsanon, staying alive any way they could, the hardship of abandonment like a silver cord that bound them to each other. She didn't remember ever having parents, but of course there had to have been some, at least at first. She understood biology. Parents were necessary. What she couldn't get her mind around was the fate that had made their lives so brutal.

'And now this, just when we were on the rise.' She swiped her eyes with dirty fingers and blew her nose on the hem of her dress. She would pilfer what she

could from the fields before the wagons came. And then she would get away. ‘As far away as I can.’

Damn that strange witch for taking the horses. She’d had her eye on the black mare before they’d shown up. She recognised the horse, and would not have left either tangled up in any case. She would even have taken the palomino if it came to it, in spite of his bad temperament. A cranky animal, that one. Of course who wouldn’t be if they were pierced by briars and desperate for water? Poor wretch. She had the skills to handle him. That was no problem. She simply would have preferred the black — a sweet mare, through and through. Now they were both gone and her options for a quick escape with them.

Who the strangers were — the tall witch with the spiky yellow hair and icy blue eyes, and the young man who came so close to spotting her she shivered at the thought — she didn’t know. It had felt like he’d looked right into her bones, giving her almost no time to conceal her energy. She’d done it, though, and remained hidden. It was a risk, but the proximity was worth it. She’d crept up to them, slow and steady, without rustling a leaf or snapping a twig. She’d got close enough to hear their words, strange accents and all. Most of them, anyway. Some of the conversation was meaningless to Shaea but one thing was clear. They spoke of a portal and it sounded nearby. She closed her eyes. ‘We hunt all our lives for a way out, Xane, and now that you’re dead, I find it.’

Not everyone in Corsanon knew of the portals that linked the many-worlds. Most that had heard of them didn’t believe they were real. She and Xane did, though. She’d learned about them from Rall, a toothless woman, with lava-black skin and eyes the same, who lived in a dead-end alley near the refuse

dump. She survived, just, by selling news to the High Guard. Apparently Rall had been a witch of the Corsanon Temple once. She never talked about it and Shaea never asked, but Rall had taken a liking to her and Xane and that was a gift. The witch had taught them things, secret things — things that helped them survive. The magic Rall knew saved Shaea's life more than once, especially after Xane had gone to apprentice with the Stable Master — when he was no longer there to watch her back. She stared at his grave, her lower lip trembling.

She and Xane had believed they would someday find a portal and get out. They would escape from their life before it consumed them. When Xane was offered the apprenticeship — a miracle in itself — her hopes had risen. Though they were both gifted with animals, it was Xane the Stable Master had spotted the day of the fire and Xane who was offered the job. She closed her eyes, remembering.

The city of Corsanon was dotted with stables and kennels, usually next to inns for the convenience of travellers. Last autumn there had been a fight in the Shek, a substantial inn next to the bakery where they begged. Fights were not uncommon but this one was wild. What caused it she never heard but a table was cleaved in two and an oil lamp with it. When the fire broke out, the men continued to brawl and the place went up like a tinderbox.

Shaea and Xane had heard the screams — horses, mules and dogs terrified by the smoke and heat coming through the stable walls. Onlookers had released the animals. They'd opened the stall and kennel doors but by then the flames were so high the horses wouldn't budge. They backed into the rails, their heads tossing, whites of their eyes showing. Only the mules pinned

their ears and charged through the flames, bucking like broncos when they emerged into the street.

Shaea and Xane acted fast. The heat seared her skin and the thick smoke choked her lungs as she and her brother blindfolded each horse, keeping a calming hand on their necks. One by one they led them to safety. When the High Guard Stable Master arrived, he saw Xane leading out the last mare and nodded his approval. Shaea slipped into the background when they started to talk and before she knew it, he was packed off to begin a five-year apprenticeship with the most respected horse master east of the Prietas. Pride had swollen her heart.

Xane had to pretend he didn't know her, of course. Corsanon's homeless were shunned, thought to be diseased, so he lied, making up a story about parents who had come for the Festival of the Five Rivers. Parents who would be proud of his chance to train. They believed him, and they took him on. Though she missed him terribly, it was the best bit of luck in their short lives. Now he was dead, buried in the dirt of the Corsanon Fields, shot by one of their own arrows. What were the odds?

She pushed matted hair from her face and struggled to her feet. Following the path of the witch, she headed south towards the water hole, towards the portal that would lead to the many-worlds.

Kreshkali loosened the reins as the mare lowered her head to drink. The sound of slurping broke the monotonous drone of crows, the horses taking their fill. They'd crested the lip of the water hole with increased enthusiasm and would not be stopped, even for their riders to dismount. Kali vaulted to the ground, her boots splashing in the mud. She patted the

glossy black shoulder as the mare's muzzle glided over the surface of the spring, ripples expanding out from the contact.

'Apparently this water hole is not guarded,' Jarrod said, keeping his voice low.

'Except for him.' Kreshkali pointed at a kingfisher poised on a branch overhanging the water. The bird took flight as the Three Sisters arrived, retreating to a higher branch. Kreshkali's eyes went to the horizon but she was too low to see over the crest. A chill ran up her spine. 'Did you hear that?'

The mare lifted her head. Her ears were pricked forward, the last mouthful of water splashing down to the surface as she rolled her tongue over the bit.

'Someone's coming.' Jarrod's eyes were closed.

'We can't gallop off with their bellies full of fluid,' Kreshkali said. 'Demons!' They'd cut it too close, she knew, but the animals had had to be watered. What choice did they have? 'Suggestions, Jarrod?'

'We need to do something unexpected,' Jarrod said, his eyes opening.

'Like what?' Kreshkali could feel the rumble in the ground beneath her. They had to get away, and quickly. The agitation of her familiars added to her own.

They come, the ravens cawed in unison. Bright spears and fast running. Fly, Mistress. Fly with us.

I know, my darlings. Thank you. We're making a choice now.

'We could cut An' Lawrence off,' Jarrod said, leading the sated gelding up the slope.

Kreshkali followed beside him, scanning for approaching riders. 'How do you mean?'

'We could take the portal to the foothills of Prieta and ride back this way. An' Lawrence has to be somewhere in between.'

‘Interesting. We’d be riding straight into the blades of a hundred warriors,’ Kreshkali said. She tightened the mare’s girth, feeling the horse’s muscles bunch as she mounted. She shortened her reins. ‘And that’s only if we’re lucky enough to come out at the right time.’

‘Still, it seems preferable to trying to outrun this lot.’

‘Can you see them?’ she asked.

‘They’re coming up the ridge.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Demon’s death,’ he said under his breath. ‘They’re closer than I thought.’ He mounted up, holding the gelding back as the horse pranced in place, hooves mincing the grass. ‘They’re charging! We won’t outrun them, even with a head start.’

‘What’s it to be?’ Kreshkali followed his line of sight. She could just make them out, coming at full gallop. They’d be spotted any second. ‘The portal?’

‘Looks like our best choice now.’

Kreshkali summoned the Three Sisters who swooped alongside her, wings cutting through the air, voices shrieking. ‘To the portal, my ladies,’ she said to them. ‘Hurry now. Lead the way.’

The horses were uneasy; their sides were raw from the thorns and they were clearly not accustomed to the large birds’ proximity, but they made it to the portal before the riders had them within bowshot. The sheer rock face surrounding the opening shot skyward like a great wall. On the other side was a quarry, the city of Corsanon’s southern border. If it wasn’t for the portal, they’d be stapled to the wall any second. Kreshkali shivered before nudging the mare forward with her heels, careful not to tap the thorn wounds. ‘Gee up, beautiful. Let’s disappear.’

The Three Sisters swooped into the portal but the mare didn’t move. Her front legs braced, her nostrils

flared. The gelding was worse. He shied to the side, backing away when Jarrod tried to urge him onward.

‘They’ve never been in a portal, it seems,’ Jarrod said, keeping his mount from bolting as it spun around. He turned the gelding back, stroking his neck and talking to him. The horse finally stood still but his limbs were shaking. He snorted at the opening between the rocks. The galloping Corsanon warriors were gaining.

‘We don’t have time for this!’ Kreshkali stood up in her stirrups and chanted a calming spell. She directed it towards both animals, feeling the tension in her mare melt away as she did. ‘In we go, no hesitation,’ she said, clicking her tongue. ‘This is a safe place.’ She tightened her legs around the mare and nudged her heels deeper into the horse’s sides. After a single baulk, the horse jumped across the opening as if it were three lengths wide, lifting her hooves with exaggerated steps when she landed on the far side. Jarrod didn’t follow.

‘Demon palomino!’ Kreshkali yelled. ‘Get your horseflesh in here.’

‘That tone’s not helping, Kali.’

An arrow whizzed by Jarrod’s head and bounced off the rock face. He spun his mount around to face a barrage of arrows which fell just short of the mark and backed him into the portal. He kept backing up until the sound of the approaching Corsanons vanished. Soon the echo of hooves on fine gravel and the horses’ laboured breathing was all that could be heard. ‘Do you think they know about the corridors?’ he asked.

Kreshkali leaned over the mare’s shoulder, swiping the plasma stream before she answered. All her focus was on the shape and contours of the portal in the foothills of the Prieta Mountains — their intended destination. It was a day’s ride away as a crow flies — or a blink of

an eye through the corridors. If they got there before An' Lawrence, they could find him easily enough. If he'd already gone through, she hoped there would be a sign left behind offering some clue to his intention. The energy signatures of the Entity remained altered for some time after each pass. She was getting better at reading them. With any luck she'd know where he'd gone. 'What's that, Jarrod?' she asked.

'Do you think they're aware of this portal? Will they follow?'

'Not likely. If they knew about the portals, they would have sent troops on ahead.'

'Any sign of that?' Jarrod made to dismount and she stopped him with a warning hand.

'No Corsanon's been through here in ages, I'm certain. But we don't know what we'll find on the other end. Best stay mounted. This won't take long.'

'What's going to stop them now? Haven't we just given away the location of the portal? All ye world travellers come hither?'

'Good point.' Kreshkali closed her eyes and called in the Elementals, sending them to the entrance of the crevice as she chanted. She stroked the mare's neck to keep her still then opened her eyes and smiled. 'That should fix it.'

'I'm almost afraid to ask what you've done,' Jarrod said.

She winked. 'I conjured a bit of a glamour over the entrance. It won't look like more than a pothole in the road for quite some time. Nobody's going to be following us today.'

'Unless they saw us go in.'

'The riders were too far away, even with hawk-eyed scouts. We're safe, so you can relax.' She looked at the trembling gelding. 'And then maybe your horse will

too. He's a wreck.' She sent a further soothing spell to the animals, filling the portal with a warm glowing light.

The horses exhaled and lowered their heads. The mare cocked a hind foot and swished her tail. The gelding stretched his neck down to his knee, rubbing his face on his outstretched foreleg.

'Thanks,' Jarrod said. 'But don't take it too far. We're already here.'

Kali waited in front of the portal as the whirl of colours, like the curtain of lights in the far northern skies, dissipated. In front of them was a familiar view — the foothills below the Prieta Mountain Range. The wind swept by her face as she urged the mare forward, only to halt abruptly.

'Back!' she yelled as an arrow whizzed by her ear and hit the granite wall behind her. 'We mistimed it!'

The horses took little encouragement to retreat, but they weren't fast enough. A shower of arrows fell, one skimming Kali's shoulder, the others glancing off the rocks. The mare squealed but kept backing. The portal whisked them away. Kali didn't have time to focus on a new destination.

'Jarrod! Are you with me?' She tested her shoulder. No blood. 'Jarrod?'

'Over here.'

'What's wrong?'

'You'd better come see for yourself.'

She dismounted and led the mare further back into the corridors. When she found Jarrod, he was leaning over Teg. The Lupin wasn't breathing.

Shaea stared at the ground. All she could see was a pothole in the rutted wagon track, a deep rent where the wheels of a cart had been stuck. This couldn't be a

door to another world. No way. It wasn't even a place to hide. A mud worm would have trouble finding shelter here. She examined the area for some other means of escape but nothing came into view save the charging Corsanons. At the sound of a kingfisher, she looked up.

There was a high rock face in front of her, impossible for the horses to climb. They couldn't have gone that way. The road itself ran north and south and there was no movement for as far as her eye could see, and that was to the horizon, both ways. 'Where in all the demon's magic did they go?' she whispered.

They had vanished in a snap. One minute they were in front of her, the horses baulking when they tried to get them to climb. Idiots. No horse could manage that cliff. When she looked again, after marking the warriors' approach, they'd vanished. It was like they'd dropped out of sight, falling foot first into the underworld. But nobody could do that, could they? It was only a child's story — a witch who could disappear into the ground. She twisted around again to gauge the distance of the warriors. Too close! The sun glinted off their drawn swords and she could feel the ground beneath her rumble as the horses thundered towards her. She had to hide, and quickly. The Corsanon troops were out for blood and she had no intention of letting them have any of hers. 'Damn you, witches! Where did you go?'

She swung the shovel from her shoulder and thrust it into the ground, blinking as a purple light wisped through the air. Before she could investigate, the rumble of the troops turned into shouts. The blow and churn of the horses brought her head around again and she saw how fast they'd advanced. 'Damn you too, Corsanon pigs!'

If this was a portal, it was shut tight and they'd

left her no key. She stomped the shovel with her foot, sinking it deeper into the soil, and started up the cliff, her tattered brown cloak a perfect camouflage. She scabbled over boulders, pressing herself flat and climbing higher and higher up the quarry wall. They couldn't ride after her. She was safe from that threat, but their scouts might follow on foot. Of course, their bulk would slow them down, if they could manage at all. No one she'd ever known could climb as well as her, not even Xane. Like a spider, she could find footings and handholds where there were mere juts of rock to grasp. She could squeeze into cracks only a waif of a girl would fit. Her thin, boyish body wouldn't have made her much on the streets of Corsanon but it was her best friend here. Like the witches she'd been tracking, she vanished, leaving only her shovel behind to baffle them.